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John Morton in contemporary re



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John Morton

in Contemporary Records



Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
Harrisburg, 1967

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The cover illustration is a drawing of the silver ink stand used in the signing of both the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. It is now on display in the Assembly chamber of Independence Hall. The drawing was made by Elmer W. Youmans from a photograph by Karl Rath.

John Morton in Contemporary Records

By
Ruth L. Springer

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
Harrisburg, 1967

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Foreword

The men who resolved at Philadelphia in 1776 to separate the American colonies from the British crown, and who pledged their "Lives," "Fortunes," and "Sacred Honor" to the Declaration of Independence, set in motion two centuries of political and social transformation throughout the world.

The lives and careers of these men, because of their revolutionary decision, have always aroused uncommon interest among us. A wealth of writings and letters permits us a scholarly understanding of the more famous signers of the Declaration, as, for example, Benjamin Franklin. Other signers, less conspicuous in national service, have escaped thorough investigation, thus permitting the growth of tradition and legend to obscure their political careers and their actions during the crucial months of 1776. One of these neglected figures is Pennsylvania's John Morton, for whose political career, it was assumed, there was little documentation.

Fortunately, this assumption has been proved untrue. While involved in the editing and transcribing of records of the Holy Trinity (Old Swedes) Church of Wilmington, Delaware, Mr. and Mrs. Courtland B. Springer, of Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, discovered much material in local records to augment what had previously been published concerning John Morton. Although a complete biography cannot as yet be written, Mrs. Springer has carried on the work she and her late husband began, and has collected enough material on John Morton to warrant publication. It is hoped that this published material, used as a research tool, will enable others who are interested in John Morton to continue these studies, and that, in time, our ideas about John Morton's life will be neither fragmentary nor inaccurate.

Mrs. Gail M. Gibson, Assistant Historian of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, has assisted in the preparation of this manuscript for publication.

John Morton in Contemporary Records

JOHN MORTON, of Chester County, one of nine Pennsylvanians who signed the Declaration of Independence, has received surprisingly little biographical attention from historians. As a result many questions concerning the place and date of his birth, his early life, his political career, and the time and manner of his death have gone unanswered. These puzzles are the more difficult to solve because an accumulation of legends has tended to obscure the wealth of clear evidence that remains.

The first major effort to report in print the facts of John Morton's life was a biographical sketch published in 1824 by John Sanderson and Robert Waln, Jr., as part of a series about signers of the Declaration of Independence. This work, for which Morton's only living son, Aaron, supplied personal notes, was the basis for most of what has since been written.

It would have been unthinkable then for a publisher to present the story of a man's life and work without editorial adornment. And so the authors added an apocryphal deathbed scene, complete with "last words" which have often been quoted, even to this day:

At the close of his life, he was abandoned by some who had been his warmest friends, but whose political sentiments differed from his own, and they could neither forgive nor [nor] forget the vote which he had given in favour of independence. It was then that the patriot shone forth even amid the pangs of dissolution: "Tell them," said he, on his death-bed, and with a prophetic spirit,—“tell them that they will live to see the hour, when they shall acknowledge it to have been the most glorious service that I ever rendered to my country.”¹

Because of this, John Morton has been pictured by friends of history as a pathetic figure for whom a lonely death marked the end of a somehow disappointing life. That he was instead a strong and vigorous man, tremendously loved and trusted, that he was honored repeatedly during his lifetime with the highest offices his county and the Province of Pennsylvania could give him—these are not the popular impressions of John Morton.

And yet this is the John Morton who emerges from court records, land records, guardian accounts, and other day-by-day chronicles of

¹ John Sanderson and Robert Waln, Jr., *Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*, VI (Philadelphia, 1824), 211-222.

eighteenth-century Chester County,² from the journals of the Pennsylvania Assembly and the Continental Congress, and from letters, newspapers, and other records of his own time.

With such a wealth of contemporary resources at hand, there is no need for any writer to depend upon the work of earlier biographers, or to substitute conjecture for fact. To most of the unanswered questions about John Morton, answers can be found, and light can be thrown on many areas of his life that have been neglected.

HISTORY OF THE MORTONSON LAND

It is in the vital relationship between first settlers and their land, and in the continuing history of that land as families grew and their several branches became well defined and established, that the seeker will find his surest hope of answers to some of the most puzzling questions about John Morton. If his search centers upon early Chester County families, he will come to know, for example, each of three Mortons (all having the same given name) who appear in the 1715 tax list for the ancestral township, Ridley. He will recognize one as a grandson of the original settler, Morton Mortonson, and an occupant of his grandfather's home farm. He will identify another as Morton Mortonson's youngest son, a resident on land partly patented to and partly purchased by his father. The third he will identify as another grandson, a dweller on land that had belonged, not to Morton Mortonson, but to his other grandfather, Bartle Escheilson.

John Morton, the Signer, the location of whose birthplace has been the subject of lively controversy in recent years, belonged to a younger generation, but he, too, was descended from both Morton Mortonson and Bartle Escheilson, as well as from one of their old neighbors, John Cornelius. There are records in abundance to document the details of his heritage, both in forebears and in land, and to dispel, if they are given an opportunity to do so, whatever mists of legend and tradition have gathered around him and around the place of his birth.

The Swedes and Finns who lived along the western shore of the Delaware in the seventeenth century, and the Dutch who married

² John Morton lived in Ridley Township, in the part of Chester County—that nearest the Delaware River—from which Delaware County was erected by an Act of the General Assembly on September 26, 1789. Deeds recorded before that date, as well as wills, administration papers, and other public records for the same period, are in the Chester County Courthouse, at West Chester. Continuing records, for both land and people, will be found in the Delaware County Courthouse, at Media.

among them, found the land fruitful, the marshes rich for trapping, and the streams and forests generous. For almost the length of a generation the tides of governmental change disturbed their lives little more than did the flowing of their great river. Dutch rule replaced Swedish rule in 1655 and continued until 1664. During the next seventeen years, except for a few months in 1673–1674 when the Dutch were again in power, a succession of three English governors, Colonel Richard Nicholls, Colonel Francis Lovelace, and Major Edmund Andros, deputies of the Duke of York, administered affairs on the Delaware from their headquarters at Fort James on Manhattan Island. To protect the rights of the settlers, the Dutch gave them grants for their land, and the English, in turn, issued patents of confirmation.

One of these early settlers was Morton Mortonson, Sr., who built the earliest portion of the Morton Homestead and lived there until his death in 1706. He was born “in Finland, in Sweden,” according to the record written by Pastor Andreas Sandel on May 31, 1706, the day Morton was buried at the Swedish Church (Gloria Dei) at Wicaco, in Philadelphia County. In the village in Finland that was his birthplace, special ceremonies are still held each year to honor the memory of one who had so illustrious a descendant. Early records indicate his presence along the Delaware at least by 1654, and perhaps earlier, since Morton’s eldest son, Morton Mortonson, Jr., came to America with his father when, as he remembered it, he was eight years old.³

Among the most interesting of the documents that remain from the first years of English rule is a now fragmentary but extremely valuable

³ Pastoral record written on December 23, 1718, the day of Morton Mortonson, Jr.’s, burial in the churchyard at Wicaco. Pehr Kalm, *Resa till Norra Amerika: Tilläggsband* (Helsingfors, University of Åbo, 1929), p. 219.

Between the years 1154 and 1809 Finland was a part of Sweden, and a good many of the Swedes along the Delaware were born there. In writing that Morton Mortonson was born “i Finland i Sverige,” the pastor of the Swedish congregation to which Morton belonged was making a simple statement of fact. Many of the congregational records of Gloria Dei (Old Swedes) Church—the church books in which baptisms, communicant records, marriages, and burials prior to the year 1750 were entered—have been lost, but the account of Morton’s burial and a few other entries were copied by a distinguished visitor to Philadelphia, Peter Kalm, in the mid-eighteenth century, and are preserved in his *Resa till Norra Amerika: Tilläggsband*. This material was omitted from the *Tilläggsband*, or “Supplement,” in the English translation of Kalm’s writings published in 1937 as *The America of 1750: Peter Kalm’s Travels in North America* (2 vols.; reprinted in paperback, New York: Dover Publications, 1964). More about Gloria Dei, the Swedish church at Wicaco, will be found in Ruth L. Springer and Louise Wallman, “Two Swedish Pastors Describe Philadelphia, 1700 and 1702,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXXIV (1960), 194–218. Cited hereafter as *PMHB*.

census of heads of families along the river, including the present counties of Philadelphia, Delaware, and New Castle. The page bearing the date is missing, but enough information about persons named has been gathered to enable researchers to agree that the roll could have been taken at least as early as 1671, but not later than 1674. In "Ammerland" (Amosland, the name then of much of what is now Ridley Township, Delaware County), eight dwellers are listed: Hendrick Johnson, Bartill Eschilson, Olla Sloubee [Slubey], John Grilsaw [Grelson], Mathias Mattison [Mathiason], Martin Martinson [Morton Mortonson], Jacob Clementson, and Hendrick Tauta [Torton].⁴

On May 1, 1671, however, when Governor Lovelace issued a patent to two of the Amosland dwellers, "Hendrick Jansen & Bartle Escheilson," for land already in their "Tenour & Occupation," he referred to one of their neighbors whose name does not appear in the census. "Jan Cornelleys" is described, in company with Mathias Mathiason and Morton Mortonson, as an adjoining landholder.⁵ This appears to establish a date prior to 1671 for the early census now in the New York State Library.

On May 18, 1672, a confirming patent, much like the one given to Hendrick and Bartle a year earlier, was issued to their neighbors Jan [John] Cornelius, Mathias Mathiason, and Morton Mortonson.⁶

During the summer these three patentees addressed the Governor with a complaint about attempted trespassing upon their meadow land.

⁴ New York State Library, Albany, New York Colonial Manuscripts, XXI, 104-105. In Edmund B. O'Callaghan and Berthold Fernow (eds.), *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (Albany, 1883-1887), XII, 646-649; and John B. Linn and William Henry Egle (eds.), *Pennsylvania Archives*, Second Series (19 vols., 1874-1890), VII, 805-808 (1878 ed.), this early record was published as if it were part of a census taken several years later for Governor Andros—a list of the "Responceble house keepers" on Cedar Creek, the St. Jones River, the Murderkill, and Duck Creek, all farther down the Delaware than the area included in the earlier census. For later census *see* New York State Library, New York Colonial Manuscripts, XXI, 103 (a) -103 (b).

⁵ Hall of Records, Dover, Delaware, New Castle County Deed Book A-1, p. 32 (May 1, 1671): patent, Francis Lovelace, Esq., to Hendrick Jansen and Bartle Escheilson.

⁶ City Hall, Philadelphia, Recorder of Deeds, Exemplification Book No. 8, p. 444 (May 18, 1672): Patent, Francis Lovelace, Esq., to Jan Cornelis, Mattys Mattyson, and Martin Martinson. *See also* Delaware County Courthouse, Deed Book B-1, p. 454 (July 9, 1779): Jonas Morton to Sketchley Morton.

In his excellent *Atlas of Delaware County*, published in Philadelphia in 1880, Benjamin H. Smith shows the location of the properties described in this and other grants and patents, and of the earliest roads for which surveys remain. Mr. Smith's beautiful original drawings for the *Atlas* are now owned by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

His response, which directs an inquiry by the Court at Upland (the present city of Chester, Delaware County, a few miles down river from Amosland) and which refers to all three men by name, is dated August 8, 1672.⁷ This is the last reference to Mathias Mathiason in connection with the others, or concerning their shared ownership of property, that has been found. By what means his portion passed into the hands of Morton Mortonson and John Cornelius is not yet known.

In 1671 Governor Lovelace had appointed as surveyor general "in Delaware River" a man whose name, Walter Wharton, is a familiar one to students of land records. In the autumn of 1675, Wharton surveyed for John Cornelius and Morton Mortonson the property described in the 1672 patent as being about 200 acres; he found that by actual measurement it contained 728 acres, "More or Lesse."⁸

The earliest formal narrative we have of the proceedings of the Upland Court begins in November, 1676, although the court had been in session, at least occasionally, much before this. Following the entries for November, 1677, a list of "Tydables" (taxables) is recorded. It includes:

Mort Mortenss Junior
Jan Corneliss & Son
Mort: Mortense Senior
Lace [Lasse, Laurence] Mortense [a son of Morton Mortonson,
Sr., who predeceased his father].⁹

In 1681, when William Penn was granted the territory "west of the Delaware and between New York and Maryland," there was once more a shift of governmental authority, as well as a surge of new settlers to the Delaware.

On a map drawn early in 1683 by Charles Ashcom, Chester County surveyor, the houses of John Cornelius and Morton Mortonson stand side by side.¹⁰ On July 8 of that year, Ashcom made a resurvey of John's holdings, suggesting what later records confirm, that he had died without making a will and that the court had ordered a resurvey

⁷ Linn and Egle (eds.), *Pennsylvania Archives*, Second Series, V (1877), 621.

⁸ Albert Cook Myers (ed.), *Walter Wharton's Land Survey Register, 1675-1679* (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1955), p. 97.

⁹ Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Logan Papers, Record of the Court at Upland, 1676-1681, p. 49.

¹⁰ "A drafft of some part of the county of Chester in pensylvania wherein is showed how the people are setled and what distance other from other and what part of there land they dwell upon and who lives nearest to other Also what quantety of acres every one hath by Charles Ashcom surveour for the county of Chester 1683." Historical Society of Pennsylvania, manuscript division, Catalog No. Of556* 1683.

and valuation of his property. In 1695 John Cornelius' eldest son, Andrew Johnson, conveyed to Morton Mortonson, Sr., all his holdings "not previously disposed of."¹¹

In the summer of 1699, and again in 1700, Andreas Rudman, Pastor Sandel's predecessor in Wicaco Parish, visited the Morton Homestead and wrote down in his record the names of those who lived there: "Gamla [Old] Morton Morton" and his wife Helena, and sons Mathias, 28, and Andrew, 25. Pastor Rudman then listed Mathias a second time, with his wife Anna, daughter of John Justis, and five children, of whom the oldest was Andrew, 6.¹² By this time Morton Mortonson's other children, including Morton Mortonson, Jr., the Signer's grandfather, had settled away from the homestead.

Mathias' growing family made additional living quarters necessary, and about 1698 a second log house was built, near the first but not joined to it. Later the intervening space was enclosed with walls of stone, for added strength, and eventually a continuous roof covered the entire long, narrow structure, creating the appearance now familiar to those who have visited the restored Morton Homestead or have seen it in photographs.

On May 24, 1703, the venerable Morton Mortonson deeded his home and the plantation belonging to it to his son Mathias. For his part, Mathias promised to take care of and maintain "me y^e s^d Morton Mortonson, & my wife dureing y^e Remainder of o^r [our] Natura [*sic*] lives."¹³

Mathias survived his father by only a few years. After his death and that of his stepmother, Helena Mortonson, his widow married a member of the Swedish congregation at Christina (present-day Wilmington, Delaware), and went to New Castle County to live, taking six of her seven children with her and leaving Andrew, the eldest, in

¹¹ Chester County Courthouse, Deed Book A-1, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 230 (March 12, 1694/5): Andreas Johnson to Morton Mortonson. In preparation for the transfer of property from Andrew Johnson to Morton Mortonson, Robert Longshore, surveyor, prepared a map on which their holdings are marked off in alternating strips of from 60 to 138 acres each. A copy is at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Catalog No. Of610 1705 [the date assigned is at least ten years too late].

¹² Gloria Dei (Old Swedes) Church, Philadelphia, manuscript records, "earliest" volume; transcribed in "Notes and Queries," *PMHB*, II (1878), 228. See Springer and Wallman, "Two Swedish Pastors," *PMHB*, LXXXIV (1960), 203.

¹³ Chester County Courthouse, Deed Book A-1, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 231 (May 24, 1703): Morton Mortonson, of Amosland, to Mathias Mortonson, of Amosland. Amosland, variously spelled, was the early name given to a large part of Ridley Township.

the homestead.¹⁴ He was a plowwright by trade and is often called "Plow Andrew" in township records. He continued to live in the homestead throughout his life, and his son Jonas succeeded him as its owner.¹⁵

From the beginning there seems to have been a natural landing place at this point on Darby Creek. In a Chester County Court record for February 9, 1687/8, the report of five men appointed by the court to lay out a road from Springfield to "y^e landing Place att Amos land" is given.¹⁶ The viewers describe the course they followed, "marking the trees as wee came," and "soe on to y^e landing Place by the maine creeks Side beyond Morten Mortensons House."

This new road "from the East part of Springfeild . . . Down to the Navigable Water at Amors Land," as it is later described, was not very popular with some of the farmers whose property it crossed. On May 31, 1726, a group of residents of Springfield, Ridley, and Darby townships informed the court that "Some of the Inhabitance have presumed to stop and jmpede [*sic*] the said Road to the great Damage of us your petitioners."¹⁷ On August 31, 1726, a new survey was ordered, and a few months later the well-known Amosland Road came into being.

Perhaps some reader would like to have the interesting experience of driving along that part of the course "view'd and Layd out" on November 21, 1726, which goes from

. . . White Oak marked with five Notches Standing by the Kings Road leading from Darby to Chester then along the s^d Road towards Chester, one Hundred and forty Seven pches to a black Oak marked with five Notches Standing on the South East Side of the said Kings Road, thence on the Swedes Land South . . . [165 perches]¹⁸ to a post by Darby Creek af^d near one Andrew Mortons House.¹⁹

If so, he may begin at the place where Amosland Avenue comes into the Chester Pike (the King's Road) from the north, and drive toward

¹⁴ Courtland B. and Ruth L. Springer (eds. and trans.). "Communicant Records, 1713-56, Holy Trinity (Old Swedes) Church, Part I, 1713-18," *Delaware History*, V (1952-1953), 286, n. 35. Cited hereafter as *DH*.

¹⁵ Chester County Courthouse, Deed Book E-1, Vol. 5, p. 546 (February 9, 1738/9): deed of gift, Andrew Morton, of Amosland, to Jonas Morton, of the same place, his eldest son.

¹⁶ Chester County Courthouse, Prothonotary's Office, manuscript records of the Court at Chester, 1681-1697, p. 82.

¹⁷ Chester County Courthouse, Clerk of Courts, Road Papers, II (1725-1733), No. 5.

¹⁸ A perch, now more commonly known as a rod, equals sixteen and a half feet.

¹⁹ Chester County Courthouse, Clerk of Courts, Road Papers, II, No. 11.

Chester for almost five-tenths of a mile (that is, for 147 perches), to Lincoln Avenue. After turning left, or south, at this intersection and driving a little more than five-tenths of a mile (or 165 perches) he will see ahead of him the bridge built at the old landing place on Darby Creek, and to his right the Morton Homestead.

While the Morton Homestead was thus being handed from one generation to another in Mathias Mortonson's family, another branch of the Morton family had been established somewhat farther up Darby Creek by Mathias' younger brother Andrew. In 1703, a few months after Andrew's marriage,²⁰ Morton Mortonson, Sr., his father, conveyed to him by deed of gift a 257-acre tract in what is now the borough of Norwood, Delaware County.²¹ This tract was partially composed of lands Morton had held from the time of the 1672 patent and partially of the land sold to him in 1695 by Andrew Johnson. Here, a little more than a mile east of the old home, Andrew Mortonson lived until 1722.²² In that year he died, leaving a widow, Margaret, and five young daughters.²³

An intriguing sidelight upon John Morton (the Signer's) family tree is given by a study of the many intermarriages of the families along the Delaware.

John Cornelius, Morton Mortonson's neighbor, had, in addition to his sons Andrew and Erick, a son called John Archer.

Although it was "the Constant Usage and Custom among the Swedes and first Settlers of Pennsylvania for the sons to assume and take upon

²⁰ Gloria Dei Church, Philadelphia, account book in manuscript records, "earliest" volume, entry for January 13, 1703, concerning "And: Mårtenson's" wedding. The Swedish pastors on the Delaware kept their church books as they would have done in Sweden, with the year beginning on January 1. Andrew's marriage, therefore, was recorded as taking place in 1703, not in "1702/3."

²¹ Deed acknowledged May 25, 1703, before the Chester County Court of Quarter Sessions. Courthouse, Clerk of Courts, "Old Court Record No. 1," Part 2, p. 103.

²² Sometimes called "Andrew Morton of Muckanipot," because of the location of his home near Muckinipattus Creek.

²³ Chester County Courthouse, Administration and Orphans' Court Papers and subsequent deeds from Andrew's heirs. See Appendix II.

Map from Benjamin Smith's *Atlas of Delaware County*, 1880, gives locations of earliest land patents in Amosland, an area in which the various branches of the Morton family lived, and locations for the earliest roads for which surveys remain.



themselves the Christian Name of their father with the Termination son as & for their Surname,"²⁴ this pattern was not inflexible. To have a descriptive, occupational, or place name as a surname was by no means uncommon. A son of Neils Matson was better known as Anthony Long than as Anthony Neilson, though the word "long" apparently was descriptive of his tract of land, rather than of his height. The many descendants of John Anderson, ship's gunner, are called Stalcop from the Swedish "stålkolta" (steel jacket). Henry Snecker was a carpenter, or "snickare." Peter Matson's younger brother was called Dahlbo for the family home in Sweden.

John Archer's name, however, confused even his contemporaries. Throughout much of his long life it was subject to a far greater number of variants—from Arkie to Orchard—than would be possible if the word "archer" had been intended to convey its usual meaning. An arrow served as his legal mark, a rather conventional one, but this appears to have no special significance.

Of real importance, however, is the fact that a deed written in 1685 calls him "John Arian,"²⁵ as does a congregational census taken in 1693, and the fact that Pastors Andreas Rudman and Andreas Sandel entered his name in church building accounts and other records from 1698 to 1701 as Arian Jeanson and Arian Johnson. In the year of his death, 1740, he is listed among church contributors from Amosland as "Arian Orchierd." The name Arian, or Ariaen, found in many Dutch families of the period, helps to confirm his Dutch ancestry on his father's side. His mother was born in Sweden, as the record of her burial in Wicaco Churchyard states:

A:o 1713 d. 8 Febr. Mårten Mårtenssons Enka Helena, född i Sverige, 97 år gammal.²⁶

And so, while "Gamla" Morton Mortonson, of the Morton Homestead, was John Morton's great-grandfather on his father's side, Morton's wife Helena was John's great-grandmother on his mother's side!

²⁴ Chester County Courthouse, Deed Book A-2, Vol. 25, p. 343 (January 10, 1786): indenture tripartite, Sketchley Morton and Rebecca, his wife, Aaron Morton, John Crozer.

²⁵ New Jersey, Office of Secretary of State, Trenton, West New Jersey Deeds, Liber E, p. 337 (May 9, 1685): Andrew Robeson to Morton Mortonson and John Arian, his son.

²⁶ "[Buried] in the year 1713, the 8th of February, Morton Mortonson's widow, Helena, born in Sweden, 97 years old." Pehr Kalm, *Resa till Növa Amerika: Tilläggsband*, 219.

For Helena was the widow of John Cornelius, the mother of John Archer, and the grandmother of Mary Archer, who was John Morton's mother.²⁷

JOHN MORTON'S BIRTHPLACE

With this background of the Morton family in mind, the history of John Morton's branch becomes clearer. The ancestral land on which John Morton was born descended, not from Morton Mortonson or John Cornelius, but from a third great-grandfather, their neighbor Bartle Escheilson, who, like Morton, was born in Finland. Bartle and his father, Escheil (Eskill) Larson (Lars' son), came to America some years before Morton's arrival here.²⁸ Moving from Upland, where he is found in 1644, Bartle was one of the very early settlers in Amosland. The patent issued to him on May 1, 1671, in company with Hendrick Johnson, has already been mentioned. Much of the Hendrickson story is told in "The Hendricksons of Crum Creek and the 'Old Swedes House,'" published in 1961 in *The Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine*.²⁹ However, research on the Bartlesons is by no means complete. There are, for example, strong indications of a close tie between Bartle Escheilson's children and the children of John Archer, a generation later. What was it? Was John Archer's wife, Gertrude, a daughter of Bartle Escheilson?

One of Bartle's sons, John Bartleson, eventually came into possession of all his father's land and marsh in Ridley Township, the other heirs relinquishing to him their rights in the property. John was unmarried, and a pastoral record made in 1699 or 1700 describes him as living with the Morton Mortonson, Jr., family on Calcon Hook (in Darby Township).³⁰ On February 23, 1704/5, by deed of gift, he conveyed his Ridley Township property to two of his nephews, Andrew Morton and John Morton (the Signer's father), of Darby

²⁷ See n. 24, above. Also, Chester County Courthouse, Deed Book X-1, Vol. 22, p. 67 (December 10, 1782): William Archer and Margaret, his wife, to Jeremiah Andrews; Chester County Court Records, "Old Court Record No. 1," Part 1, p. 168 (June 10, 1695): acknowledgment of deed, Andros Johnson to John Orchard.

²⁸ Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Swedish Manuscripts, Governor Johan Printz' List of Inhabitants, March 1, 1648; and 1641 List of Passengers of Ship "Charitas" from Gottenburgh to Nova Suecia.

²⁹ H. Edgar Hammond and Ruth L. Springer, "The Hendricksons of Crum Creek and the 'Old Swedes House,'" *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine*, XXII, No. 2 (1961), pp. 45-92. Cited hereafter as PGM.

³⁰ See n. 12 above.

Township, and to George Van Culin, of Ridley Township, husband of their sister Margaret.³¹

Margaret Bartleson, daughter of Bartle Escheitson, married Morton Mortonson, Jr., about 1674, and their home was established on Calcon Hook in what was soon to become Darby Township. There the Signer's father, John Morton, was born on June 1, 1683.³²

Tax returns show that by 1718, John, Sr., had settled in Ridley Township on the land his mother's brother, John Bartleson, had given him. There he built the home to which he brought his bride, a neighbor's daughter, Mary Archer. This was the "land and plantation" that he later devised to his wife and unborn child and that his son, in turn, devised to his own wife and son Aaron. The location of the property is easily determined from deeds and maps.

Certainly it was here, in her own home on her husband's farm, that Mary Morton's son was born. This was the custom of the times, the way of her people.

Nearby—little more than a mile away—lived her parents, John and Gertrude Archer, two of her sisters, Helena and Elizabeth Archer, and other members of the family.

Earlier, Mary's sister Catharina had married a member of the Swedish congregation at Christina (Wilmington, Delaware), and manuscript records of Holy Trinity (Old Swedes) Church there tell of the presence of Gertrude Archer for the baptism of her daughter's infant son, John Walraven, on August 23, 1724.³³ There is little doubt that she was also present for his birth and for the birth and baptism of her grandson John Morton, although the baptismal records of the Wicaco Church, to which the Mortons and Archers belonged, are missing for this period.

Writers have given the birth and death dates of John Morton, the Signer, only superficial attention. One standard biography says, for

³¹ Chester County Courthouse, Deed Book A-1, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 213 (February 23, 1704/5): John Bartleson to Andrew Morton and John Morton, "sons of Morton Mortonson of ye Township of Darby," and George "Vankulin" [Culin, Van Culin], of Ridley. Also, Hammond and Springer, "The Hendricksons of Crum Creek," *PGM*, XXII, 50, n. 14.

³² "Notes and Queries," *PMHB*, II (1878), p. 228; Springer and Springer, "Communicant Records, . . . Part V, 1727-48," *DH*, VI (1954-1955), 56, n. 5.

³³ Hall of Records, Dover, Delaware, Holy Trinity (Old Swedes) Church, Wilmington, Delaware, Manuscript Records, Second Book, p. 150; Springer and Springer, "Communicant Records, . . . Part V, 1727-48," *DH*, VI, 309.

example, that Morton was born “about 1724.” Another says, “1724 or 1725.” There is general agreement that he died in April, 1777, because an inventory of his estate made in that month is well known and because Aaron Morton’s notes, mentioned above, say his father died “in April 1777.”³⁴ It seems to have been taken for granted, however, that the exact day of his death could not be found. And yet in Bradford’s *The Pennsylvania Journal; and the Weekly Advertiser* (Philadelphia) for Wednesday, April 23, 1777, the following obituary notice appears:

On Tuesday, the first instant [April 1, 1777] died on his plantation, four miles this side of Chester, the Honourable JOHN MORTON, 51 years of age; and, attended by a great number of people, he was buried the day following in the burial ground belonging to the Church of England, in Chester,³⁵ the place of worship he used to frequent. This gentleman was well known for his integrity and probity, and the confidence of the public is best ascertained from the several offices he held—As an Assemblyman for many years; a Magistrate and High Sheriff; and of late as Judge, Speaker of the House, and Member of Congress.—As these were the crowns he received in broad day light, THESE, as well as his excellent amiable character in a domestic, social, civil and religious light, were held up on the Sunday following from 2 Tim. ii.5. in Kingessing’s Church,³⁶ in the forenoon, and in Chester Church in the afternoon, by the Reverend Commissary of the Swedish Mission on Delaware.³⁷

These brief, neglected lines are in many ways more satisfactory than later writings have been. And they establish the date of Morton’s death. But what of his birth?

John Morton’s father, knowing that he was about to die, made his will on February 6, 1724/5, with provision for his wife and their unborn child. Two weeks later the will was probated.³⁸ According to

³⁴ The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, has a transcript of Aaron Morton’s notes as they were copied on June 16, 1894, by his granddaughter Margaret Armitt (Marshall) Williams, of Greenwich, Ohio. [See n. 68 below.]

³⁵ St. Paul’s Episcopal Church.

³⁶ In Philadelphia County. A part of the Swedish parish of which Gloria Dei Church, at Wicaco (now in Philadelphia City, as is St. James), was the center. “Kingessing’s Church,” St. James Episcopal Church, holds its Swedish background in unfailing remembrance.

³⁷ Rev. Andrew Göransson.

³⁸ Chester County Courthouse, West Chester, Will Book A-1, p. 166. A document that bears the signature of father and son can be seen in the Hanson Room in the John Morton Memorial Building (the Swedish Museum) in Philadelphia. It is a deed signed by the elder John Morton, as a witness, on May 18, 1716, and signed by his son, as a justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, on July 18, 1774, when the unrecorded conveyance was brought before him to be acknowledged.

the Old Style calendar then in use in England and her colonies, the year began, not on January 1 but on March 25. Double dates, as "1724/5," were written from January 1 through March 24. In 1752, however, the present, or New Style, calendar was adopted, and past events were reckoned as if the years had always begun on January 1. That Morton was born in 1725 is certain, and the fact that his age is given in the newspaper obituary as fifty-one years indicates the probability that his birth took place after April 1, 1725, as he would otherwise have been fifty-two at the time of his death. Perhaps further research will uncover the exact date.³⁹

MOTHER AND STEPFATHER

The period of John Morton's early life is one for which records are few. Here is a boyhood to be traced out in the pages of the later years.

There is one event of the boyhood years, however, that can be given a more definite date than has heretofore seemed possible. This event, which had a most beneficent and far-reaching influence on John Morton's life, was his mother's marriage to John Sketchley, an Englishman from the neighboring township of Springfield.

Manuscript records of Holy Trinity Church (Wilmington) state that "Maria Morten, widow," was a baptismal sponsor for an infant nephew (son of her sister Catharina) on April 23, 1732.⁴⁰ The following January Mary Morton's name appears on the list of taxables in Ridley Township, while that of John Sketchley, "freeman" (*i.e.*, unmarried), is on the roll for Springfield Township as in several preceding years. On the next biennial tax list, however, under date of January 7, 8, 9, 1734/5, "Jn^o Schetchly's" name replaces that of Mary Morton in Ridley Township.⁴¹

This quiet, unassuming, but altogether remarkable man was able to recognize in his young stepson unusual qualities which, with patience, wisdom, and affection, he undertook to develop to the full. It is quite easy today to find such tangible evidences of John Sketchley's years in Chester County as survey maps, administration papers, and inventories of neighbors' estates, all in his own hand. But it is upon

³⁹ The change from the Old Style to the New Style calendar set everything forward eleven days. Morton's birthday, therefore, might have shifted from late March to early April, but there is nothing to indicate that it did.

⁴⁰ Holy Trinity Church, Manuscript Records, Second Book, p. 229; Springer and Springer, "Communicant Records, . . . Part V, 1727-48," *DH*, VI, 310, n. 15.

⁴¹ Chester County Historical Society, manuscript tax lists, 1715-1900.

the character of John Morton that a true appreciation of John Sketchley must be based.

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

One example of Sketchley's singularly clear sense of values³ is found in his calm assumption that his wife's son—the phrase is his own, used to the end of his life—would continue in the close relationship to the Swedish parish and church that was the boy's heritage.

Though himself a vestryman and warden at St. Paul's, the English church in Chester,⁴² Sketchley found nothing inappropriate in his being counted the head of a Swedish family when a census of Wicaco Parish was taken in 1743.⁴³ And when, years after his stepfather's death, John Morton was senior warden at St. Paul's,⁴⁴ he was at the same time deeply concerned with Swedish congregational matters. In the building of a new Swedish church within Wicaco Parish, St. James, Kingsessing Township, he had an active part.

There is a memorable entry in Henry Melchior Muhlenberg's journal for 1761 in which he tells of setting out from Wicaco on July 29 with the Swedish provost, Carl Magnus Wrangel, for a pastoral tour. They crossed the Schuylkill River by ferry, visited several Swedish families, and came at length—Provost Wrangel riding in a chaise and Pastor Muhlenberg on horseback—to Tinicum Island. Next morning they inspected the ruins of the historic church there, and the cemetery, which the river had almost completely washed away. By noontime a small congregation had gathered and Muhlenberg preached to them in English from Revelation 3:11 (“ . . . hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.”).

In the afternoon [continues the entry] we returned, accompanied by several friends, to Squire Morton's in Amasland. A meeting had been called there to discuss the erection of a new Swedish Church. . . . When the meeting was ended we rode toward Philadelphia, reaching home in Wicaco by evening.⁴⁵

The new church of which he speaks was St. James, Kingsessing.

⁴² Chester County Courthouse, Deed Book E-1, Vol. 5, p. 316 (February 19, 1734/5): James Mather *et al.*, to John Mather and John Sketchley, the present church wardens of St. Paul's Church, Chester.

⁴³ Gloria Dei Church, manuscript records, “earliest” volume.

⁴⁴ Chester County Courthouse, Deed Book O-1, Vol. 14, p. 490 (February 2, 1765): John Mather *et al.*, to John Morton and William Marlow, the present church wardens of St. Paul's Church, Chester.

⁴⁵ Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein (trans.), *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1942-1945), I, 459-460.

JOHN MORTON'S MARRIAGE

At the time of John Sketchley's death in 1753, he and his wife Mary were living on the farm, near the Morton farm, where they had moved at the time of John Morton's marriage to Ann Justis, of Newport, New Castle County.⁴⁶

The date of this marriage is not now of record. There is little doubt, however, that it took place between October 28, 1748, and November 29, 1749, an interval when no entries were made in the marriage records of Holy Trinity Church because it was without a pastor. A marriage performed by a visiting clergyman would have been entered in his own records, not in the church book.

Ann Justis, who was born July 27, 1732, was a daughter of Morton and Brita (Walraven) Justis, faithful communicants of Holy Trinity Church.⁴⁷ Morton Justis, a son of Justa and Anna (Morton) Justis, of Philadelphia County, was John Morton's cousin once removed—that is, he was first cousin to John's father.

On the Ridley Township tax roll for 1747–1748, John Sketchley's name appears in its usual place, but inserted below it at some time after the original list was written is "& John Morton." There is also an increase in the assessment, evidently for the land Sketchley had purchased. The tax list for 1749–1750 has separate entries for the two men, leading to the conclusion that they had by then established separate households.

In a congregational census of Wicaco Parish (including Ridley Township) taken by Pastor Olove Parlin in 1752–1753, John and Ann Morton are reported as having one child, a son, "Schetsly."⁴⁸ Another son, Jacob Morton, is named in John Sketchley's will of January 29, 1753.⁴⁹ A daughter, Mary Morton, born June 17, 1754, was baptized on July 28, 1754, according to Wicaco (Gloria Dei) Church records. John and Ann's younger children, as named in their father's will, were Sarah, John, Lydia, Aaron, Ann, and Elizabeth.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ann Justis' identity is established by her son Aaron's notes [*see* n. 34 above], and by records of the disposition of her father's estate.

⁴⁷ Holy Trinity Church, Manuscript Records, Second Book, p. 229. For additional notes on the Justis family see Springer and Springer, "Communicant Records, Part I, 1713-18," *DII*, V, 276, n. 16.

⁴⁸ Gloria Dei Church, manuscript records, "earliest" volume.

⁴⁹ Chester County Courthouse, Will Book C-3, p. 399.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, F-6, 280.

MORTON'S PUBLIC SERVICE

It is possible to find in such contemporary publications as Philadelphia newspapers and the *Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representatives of the Province of Pennsylvania*, and in the *Journals of the Continental Congress*, printed later, annals of Morton's membership in the Assembly and in Congress.

Minutes of the Pennsylvania Assembly for June 28, 1756, report the outcome of a special election. In Chester County "*John Morton* was chosen Representative to serve in Assembly for the said County, in the Room and Stead of *William Peters*," who had resigned. The next day, June 29, young Morton took his place for the first time as a member of the body in which he was to serve, except for one interval, until a few months before his death.

Continuing records tell of Morton's increasing duties and responsibilities in the Assembly, and they reflect a steady growth in his stature. In October, 1765, he went to New York as one of the three commissioners from Pennsylvania to the Stamp Act Congress, and it was he who brought back the formal reports to the Assembly.

Records that tell of "Squire Morton's" relations with his neighbors in Amosland and on Tinicum Island, and in other places close by will prove as rewarding to the biographer as records relating to his public life in Chester and Philadelphia. A good many of the accounts he kept for his neighbors with such painstaking care, the maps he made for them, the road petitions he drew up, and some of the letters he wrote have been saved.⁵¹ There never was, it seems likely, a man more sought after than he, as guardian, administrator, adviser, advocate, and friend. And his neighbors, with the same confidence they placed in him as an every-day adviser, elected John Morton to represent them in the Assembly of the Province of Pennsylvania.

A SENSE OF OBLIGATION

On October 1, 1766, Morton was returned to the Assembly as usual, and Philip Ford, his "kinsman" and long-time friend, who had been sheriff of Chester County for the previous two years, was re-elected to that office.⁵²

⁵¹ One of Morton's guardian accounts tells matter-of-factly about the work he himself did in "mending a flue bank." Chester County Courthouse, Orphans' Court, Minors' Estates, 1734-1809, children of John Hendrickson of Darby Creek.

⁵² Philip Ford's wife, Margaret Archer, was John Morton's first cousin. In contemporary documents each man refers to the other as "kinsman." Philip was survived by his wife and five young children.

Before the month ended, however, Ford was dead. And a few days later the Governor commissioned John Morton sheriff of Chester County.

So begins the "interval" referred to above—a period of almost three years which Morton's biographers have noted without curiosity, although some of them have commented rather apologetically that he must have been out of favor with the voters, "not to have been returned to the Assembly."

The decision to accept the Governor's appointment to the sheriff's office was undoubtedly one of the hardest Morton ever had to make. His devotion to the Assembly was complete, his membership a personal dedication. On the other hand, a man for whom he felt warm affection and an almost brotherly responsibility had died, leaving a good deal of unfinished public business.

Ford's hastily drawn will placed the duties of guardianship and administration on his friend's shoulders; Morton chose also to assume Ford's obligations to the people of Chester County and to discharge them until such time as he could return with a good conscience to his own place in the Assembly.

An extract from Assembly minutes for January 13, 1767, reads:

Mr. *Morton* informing the House that he had, since their last Sitting, accepted the Governor's Commission of High-Sheriff for the County of *Chester*, and was apprehensive that the Duties of the said Office might interfere with his Attendance in Assembly, as a Representative for the County aforesaid, the House took the same into Consideration, and after some Time spent therein, it was, upon the Question,

Resolved, N. C. D. That the Office of High-Sheriff, and a Right to sit as a Member of Assembly, are incompatible, and, therefore, that the Seat of the said *John Morton* is become vacant by his Acceptance of the said Office.⁵³

The Assembly directed Morton, as sheriff, to call a special election in Chester County, and on March 23, 1767, Jonas Preston was chosen as the new representative.

In the regular October elections for 1767 and 1768, John Morton was returned to the office of sheriff. Following the election of Monday,

⁵³ *Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representatives of the Province of Pennsylvania*, V (Philadelphia, 1775), 507. Republished in Gertrude MacKinney and Charles F. Hoban (eds.), *Pennsylvania Archives*, Eighth Series (8 vols., 1931-1935), VII, 5957.

October 2, 1769, however, his name was in its old place on the list of representatives from Chester County to the Assembly, and there it remained until that historic body's final adjournment on September 26, 1776. For the last year and a half of the Assembly's life, he was its presiding officer.

MORTON AS A JUDGE

A year after his first election to the Assembly, Morton was appointed one of the justices for Chester County, where he served in the several county courts until November, 1764. In that month Governor John Penn struck at his political foe Benjamin Franklin, who was in London, by failing to renew Morton's commission and those of justices in other counties who were known to be Franklin's friends. On December 20, 1764, John Ross wrote to Franklin from Philadelphia:

Since your departure the most important matter that has happen'd has been the issuing new Commissions of the peace for this [Philadelphia] and the Countys of Chester and Bucks: Mr William Moore of Chester County is put at the head of the Commission there, and John Morton Esq^r left out; for this County [Philadelphia] Mr Potts and Pawling⁵⁴ are also omitted, to their great ease and quiet, but certainly to the great disquiet of the generality of the good People of those Countys.⁵⁵

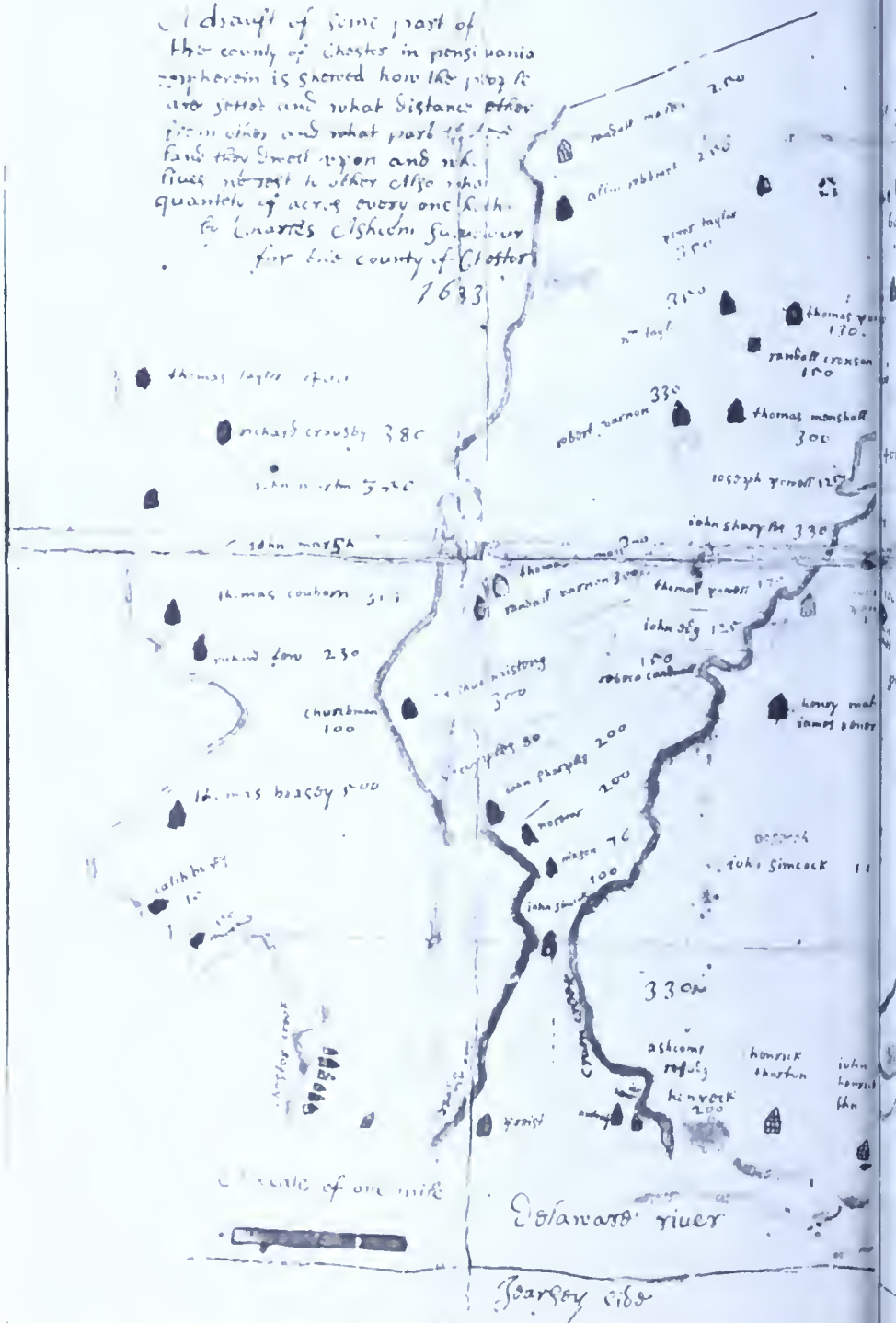
⁵⁴ Justices John Potts, Jr., and Henry Pawling, of Philadelphia County.

⁵⁵ American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Franklin Papers, I, Part 2, No. 115, John Ross to Benjamin Franklin, December 20, 1764. On December 18 Charles Thomson had also written Franklin about the changes in the courts, observing that in York County an entirely new set of justices had been commissioned. "In Chester County," he continued, "the change was not so great, some having voted right at the late Election. . . . However Morton, the chief Burgess of Chester & some others were left out." (APS, Franklin Papers, I, Part 2, No. 112.) This letter has given rise to the impression that Morton was chief burgess of Chester, an office he never held, not being at any time a resident of the borough of Chester. The burgess referred to in the letter was Paul Jackson, Thomson's brother-in-law.

Map drawn in 1783 by Charles Ashcom, Chester County surveyor, shows houses of Morton Mortonson, Sr., and John Cornelius standing side by side (center bottom). Darby Creek actually joins the Delaware River farther to the west than indicated on Ashcom's map, flowing past the Morton and Cornelius properties and forming Tinicum Island, which is not shown, to the south of them.



A draught of some part of
the county of Chester in Pennsylvania
wherein is shewed how the place
are set out and what distance there
is from one and what part of the
land they dwell upon and what
time they take to other places what
quantity of acres every one hath
by Laurens Ashmun Surveyour
for this county of Chester
1683



Franklin's reply, written from London, is dated February 14, 1765:

I received your obliging Favour of Dec. 20. and am glad to find, that tho' so distant from them, I still live in the Remembrance of my Friends. . . .

The Changes you mention in the Magistracy indicate the Measures intended, and manifest the Means by which they are to be brought about. The hasty setting aside such able & unexceptionable Magistrates merely for their Political Opinions, was not, however, a Step the most prudent, for I think it will have different Effects from those proposed by it. . . .

Be pleased to present my hearty Respects to our Friends, Potts, Pawlin[g], & Morton. They do not, I dare say, sleep a Jot the worse for their Dismission. There are Times in which

*"The Post of Honour is a private Station."*⁵⁶

Manuscript records of the Orphans' Court of Chester County mark Morton's return as a justice:

At an Orphans' Court held and kept at Chester for the County of Chester the nineteenth day of June in the Year of our Lord 1770 Before John Morton William Parker and Joshua Cowpland Esq^s Justices present.

Thereafter his name is found regularly in the records of the county courts, always in the position of presiding justice, through March 25, 1774.⁵⁷

On April 29, 1774, John Morton was appointed an associate justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.⁵⁸

MORTON'S VOTE FOR INDEPENDENCE

John Morton was elected to the Continental Congress in 1774, 1775, and 1776. His personal views on political issues at this time, especially on the issue of the independence of the colonies, have been discussed with considerable imagination by some of those who have written about him.

⁵⁶ Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Read Manuscripts, Delaware, 1716-1872, p. 9, Benjamin Franklin to John Ross, February 14, 1765.

⁵⁷ Chester County Courthouse, Prothonotary, Quarter Sessions Court Records, Dockets A and B (manuscript); and Clerk of the Orphans' Court, Orphans' Court Dockets, Vols. 6 and 7 (manuscript). All records are in chronological order.

⁵⁸ *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania*, X (Harrisburg, 1852), 173.

Very little in Morton's personal correspondence or in that of his contemporaries, or in their diaries, does more than support conclusions already drawn from public records. There is only an occasional glimpse of his private thinking on any subject coming within the realm of his public responsibilities.

Pre-eminently, John Morton was a representative of the people of Chester County, who on eighteen occasions sent him to the House of Representatives of the Province of Pennsylvania—the General Assembly—to stand for them. No other honor that came to him seems ever to have been valued so highly as this one. But his long service in the courts of Chester County, his appointment to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, his unanimous election to be speaker of the Assembly, these, too, were public trusts which imposed solemn and deeply felt responsibilities upon him.

For a writer to spend time, then, in idle speculation as to whether or not Morton personally wanted to vote "no" on the question of independence, but yielded at the last moment to political pressure from Benjamin Franklin, is an occupation which Franklin himself would have said has nothing to render it either respectable or useful.

Even more idle are scenes described in other works of conjectural history that have found their way into high school classrooms, either as texts or by way of book reports, in recent years. In one of these, "Old Judge Morton," drowsing through tense hours of congressional debate, wakes in time to "switch his vote." Another portrays him on the day of decision as being "perplexed as usual": "An honest farmer" of Swedish origin, "Mr. Morton had been puzzled for weeks" by conflicting doctrines.

In a far more scholarly work, *The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776: A Study in Revolutionary Democracy*,⁵⁹ Dr. J. Paul Selsam avers, without giving reasons for his opinion, that Morton neither voted for nor signed the Declaration of Independence voluntarily. This author, however, was far more concerned in his research and in his writing with the moving tide of forces that culminated in the Declaration than with the individuals who voted for it and later signed it. And contributing to his assumption that Morton acted against his will may have been the fact, noted by Dr. Selsam, that the Assembly was slow to respond to popular demands for strong and immediate action in favor

⁵⁹ J. Paul Selsam, *The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776: A Study in Revolutionary Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1936), p. 156, n. 76.

of independence—and that John Morton was speaker of the Assembly. He was, indeed, its presiding officer, but it was a majority group of the members, including John Dickinson, who dominated the Assembly's voting. Morton later wrote to his friend Anthony Wayne that he believed the Assembly "went too slow."⁶⁰

Although writers will continue to speculate about his personal views, it must be remembered that it was not John Morton, private citizen, who stood before Congress to affirm his decision in favor of independence, but John Morton, representative from Chester County, speaker of the Assembly, and justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

There is no minimizing the sorrow and apprehension such a man as this would feel over the tragic events he knew would follow the signing of the Declaration of Independence. And there can be no question of his unhappiness over being estranged from some of his oldest friends, whose loyalties remained with Great Britain. But to attribute his death (which followed his vote for independence by ten months) to these causes, or to assert, as Dr. Benjamin Rush once did,⁶¹ that Morton died of grief over the misery he foresaw would be brought upon Pennsylvania by her "rascally" new constitution, is fantasy.

Of course Morton loved his friends! A warmly affectionate nature was part of his heritage. And of his devotion to Pennsylvania there can never be any doubt. Every breaking of old ties, every threat to the well-being of his State would be painful to him. But not all of these together could have made him content to die, leaving his family—his mother, wife, two sons in their teens, and three young daughters, one of them only six years old—in a time of great disorder and with a British invasion of Chester County imminent. (Two other daughters had married and gone to their own homes, as had the eldest son, Sketchley, who was also actively engaged in military service.)⁶² Those who want really to know John Morton ought to read the full text of his will, written a little more than two months before he died.⁶³

⁶⁰ Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Society Collection, John Morton to Anthony Wayne, August 16, 1776.

⁶¹ Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Wayne Papers, III, 104, Benjamin Rush to Anthony Wayne, June 18, 1777.

⁶² On June 21, 1773, Sketchley Morton married Rebecca Taylor. Gloria Dei Church, manuscript records, 1750-1878; Transcript, I, 475, Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

⁶³ See Appendix II.

THE BURDENS OF HIS LAST YEARS

Whatever contributed to the illness—almost certainly consumption⁶⁴—that ended in John Morton's death on the Tuesday in Easter Week, April 1, 1777, at the age of 51, there can be no doubt that the heavy burden of work and responsibility he had carried for years, especially after March 15, 1775, when he became speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, was a major factor in his failing health.

Observe him in 1776, the year before his death: a member of Congress, through long months of urgent debate and critical decision, presiding as chairman of a committee of the whole body in late July and for most of August, while the tedious business of drafting the Articles of Confederation went on; a justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, with the many duties that office encompassed, even when the court was not in session; speaker of the Assembly during the most trying period of its long existence, with countless additional tasks imposed by the war, many of which, as the signing of commissions, could be performed only by the speaker's hand. Here was a load no man could bear, unbowed, for very long.

FOLLOWING HIS DEATH

In the months after Morton's death the British forces drew ever closer, while his widow and her Chester County neighbors took such precautions as they could to safeguard their homes and other property. After the battle of the Brandywine in September, 1777, friends persuaded Ann Morton to take what valuables she could across the river to Billingsport, New Jersey, where a fort had been erected. When the British reached Chester, however, they proceeded to cross the river and to march "with all speed" upon the fort. The Americans, realizing they could not sustain so formidable an assault, spiked their artillery, set fire to the barracks, and abandoned the fort. Whatever had been brought there for safekeeping was lost.

On November 18, 1782, in compliance with an act of the General Assembly, Ann Morton filed an accounting of her losses, a long, detailed list which is of great interest. The original document is now owned by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania,⁶⁵ and a manuscript

⁶⁴ The incidence of lung affections in Finnish-Swedish families settled along the Delaware was high. Morton's father and several of his uncles apparently died of the same malady that brought his own life to so early a closing.

⁶⁵ Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Chester County Papers, 1777 (Depredations by British Army), p. 163.

book in which this and many similar accounts were entered at the time is a treasured possession of the Chester County Historical Society at West Chester.

The two-story stone house built by John and Ann Morton about fifteen years after their marriage, replacing an earlier log structure, had a circular marble date stone on which their initials and the year were inscribed.⁶⁶ The present East Ridley Avenue, in Ridley Park, cuts across what was once the Morton farm, and the house stood just opposite the point where Tasker and Cresswell streets enter the avenue. The house is gone now, but a historical marker was placed nearby in 1967.

The 1798 tax schedules for Ridley Township give a good description of the house, which measured twenty by thirty feet and had twelve windows, with 177 "lights," or panes of glass. An adjoining log kitchen, one story high, measured sixteen by thirty feet, and there was a spring-house, built of stone, near at hand. This measured fifteen by twenty-four feet. The 1798 report closes with the observation that the property was found to be "in Midling Order."⁶⁷

THE MORTONS' CHILDREN

Aaron Morton, to whom, with his mother, "the messuage . . . and tract of land where I now dwell, which was devised to me by my Deceased Father," had come by the terms of John Morton's will, married in 1791.⁶⁸ On October 1, 1798, he was living in another part of the township, and the home property was rented to James Maddock.⁶⁹

Whether or not Ann Morton and her youngest daughter Elizabeth lived with Aaron and his family at this time is not clear. Sketchley, the eldest son, with whom she was joint executor of her husband's will, died before January 3, 1798, when Ann is called "surviving executrix"

⁶⁶ In *Sanderson's Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*, revised and edited by Robert T. Comad, illustrated with engravings prepared by William Brotherhead (Philadelphia: 1865), a picture of the house faces p. 450.

⁶⁷ United States Direct Tax of 1798, Tax Lists for the State of Pennsylvania, Roll 7, Delaware County, Ridley Township, No. 32. ("National Archives Microfilm Publications" [Washington: The National Archives, 1962]).

⁶⁸ On April 28, 1791, Aaron Morton married Frances Armitt, Gloria Dei Church, manuscript records, 1750-1878; Transcript, II, 896, Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁶⁹ Direct Tax of 1798, Roll 7, Delaware County, Ridley Township, Nos. 12 and 32.

in a letter of attorney given to Aaron,⁷⁰ although letters of administration on Sketchley's estate were not issued until March 16, 1798.⁷¹ Her son John had died as a prisoner of the British before reaching his twenty-first birthday.⁷²

Mary, eldest of the Morton daughters, married Charles Justis, a cousin, and lived in Kingsessing Township. Sarah married first William Grantham, of Ridley, and, after his death, Dr. William Currie.⁷³

That Lydia married seems to be well established, but the name of her husband is not known. What may be a clue to his identity is found in an entry made by the pastor of Wicaco Parish in his records for August 2, 1778, when, on the occasion of baptizing a daughter of Charles and Mary (Morton) Justis, he commented that Mrs. Justis was "at her sisters on Boons Island who was sick." It ought to be possible to find out exactly who lived on Boon's Island in August, 1778, but so far the records have been elusive.

Ann, one of the two daughters who were still little girls when their father died, married Captain John Davis, of Tredyffrin Township, Chester County. Her younger sister Elizabeth died unmarried.

ANN MORTON'S DEATH

No church or published record of the death of Ann (Justis) Morton, widow of John Morton, has been found. Nor do any of her descendants give the date in the course of the voluminous correspondence carried on with them just before and during the 1890's by Frank Willing Leach, of Philadelphia, as part of a massive endeavor at that time to compile records of the living descendants of all the Signers.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Chester County Courthouse, Recorder of Deeds, Letters of Attorney, A-1, p. 312.

⁷¹ Delaware County Courthouse, Administrations, No. 120.

⁷² Chester County Courthouse, Deed Book A-2, Vol. 25, p. 343, January 10, 1786: indenture tripartite, Sketchley Morton and Rebecca, his wife, Aaron Morton, John Crozer. *Also*, Aaron Morton's notes [see n. 34 above].

⁷³ See Hammond and Springer, "Hendricksons of Crum Creek," *PGM*, XXII, 74, n. 73.

⁷⁴ The "Leach, Ballard Thruston, Calvert Collection of Papers Concerning the Signers of the Declaration of Independence and Their Descendants" became the property of R. C. Ballard Thruston. The original papers were deposited with the Filson Club, in Louisville, Kentucky, but a full copy of them can be found in the Frank Willing Leach Collection at the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

A monument erected in 1845 in St. Paul's Cemetery, Chester, by members of the Morton family supplies no information about Ann's death. The last known mention of her name in public records occurs in a Delaware County court docket for January, 1799, where she is called surviving executor of John Morton's estate.

THE LEGEND OF THE MORTON HOMESTEAD

In the days just after the Civil War, a good many "traditions" about the more distant past came into being, perhaps because the recent past was too painful to think upon. It was about 1870, so nearly as can be determined now, that an ancient log-and-stone house on Darby Creek, at the site of the old ferry from Tinicum Island and in the present borough of Prospect Park, began to inspire conjectures which were not long in changing to affirmation. It was called to mind that the house had once been associated with the Morton name. Was it *the Signer's* family who lived here? Can this have been John Morton's birthplace? It must have been!

A scholarly history of Delaware County published in 1862 by Dr. George Smith, a man who loved the land and gained knowledge of the people who had lived on it as he traced the story of their properties, identified "the farm now owned by Charles Horne" (in today's borough of Ridley Park) as the place where John Morton was born.⁷⁵ There is abundant confirming evidence for Dr. Smith's statement, today, as then. But in the 1870's his words were forgotten as interest in the old house "at the Ferry" mounted.

Although a careful investigation of land titles as related to the genealogy of the Morton family would have supported Smith, and shown that the house on Darby Creek belonged to an entirely different branch of the Morton family, this was apparently never undertaken. The possibility that the house had connections with a signer of the Declaration of Independence overshadowed all else, and thus the "John Morton Birthplace" legend was erroneously begun.

In 1877, five years after Charles Horne's farm, formerly John Morton's, had been sold to the Ridley Park Association,⁷⁶ a new publication of much local interest appeared. It was a history of Chester and its

⁷⁵ George Smith, M.D., *History of Delaware County, Pennsylvania* . . . (Philadelphia, 1862), p. 487.

⁷⁶ Delaware County Courthouse, Deed Book B-3, p. 274 (December 23, 1870): Charles Horne and Martha W., his wife, to Nathaniel Thayer *et al.*; E-3, 425 (April 27, 1872): Nathaniel Thayer *et al.* to the Ridley Park Association.

environs, written by John Hill Martin, a Philadelphia lawyer who had close ties to Delaware County.⁷⁷

While gathering material for his book, Mr. Martin asked several of those best informed about old families of the area to send him data on the Mortons. Their replies, now in the John Hill Martin Collection at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, make no reference to anything more specific than Ridley Township, in present Delaware County, as the place of the Signer's birth.

Martin, whose own research did not penetrate very deeply, apparently was acquainted with only one early Morton property in Ridley Township, "the dilapidated old log house still standing though uninhabited, at Morris' Ferry, on Darby Creek."⁷⁸ This he presumed to have been John Morton's residence until 1761, when a stone house in Ridley Park was built—a house which, in 1877, Mr. Martin found "in full view of the passing trains on the Baltimore Railroad."⁷⁹

The *History of Chester* was well received and widely quoted, and its author's mistaken identification of John Morton with the house at the old ferry gave substance and authority to the growing "birthplace" tradition.

Many traditions have been harmless enough in their influence on thought and action. This one, however, produced a good deal of unhappiness, for reasons that will become apparent.

A MEMORIAL TO JOHN MORTON

In the year 1895, charters were granted to two Delaware County groups which were later to work closely together to establish a memorial to John Morton. These were the John Morton Monument Association and the Delaware County Historical Society.

At a meeting of the historical society on September 27, 1897, members heard the speaker of the day refer to "the house at Morris' Ferry," Darby Creek, as the birthplace of John Morton. On another occasion

⁷⁷ John Hill Martin, *Chester, (And Its Vicinity) Delaware County, in Pennsylvania* . . . (Philadelphia, 1877).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 141. The right of way now held by the Pennsylvania Railroad through John Morton's former property was conveyed by the Ridley Park Association to the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Rail Road Company on October 15, 1873.

photographs of the "birthplace" were shown during an illustrated lecture. It was not until 1926, however, that the society expressed official recognition of the claim made for the house at the ferry. On June 25 of that year, the sum of ten dollars was paid for a marker for "the John Morton House, Lazaretto Road." Minutes for December 13, 1926, report payment of sixty dollars rent to the owner of "a house at Morris Ferry on Darby creek, which was the birthplace of John Morton," in order to have a marker placed on the house. A matter that "claimed the attention of the Society for future action" was "preservation of the birthplace of John Morton, at Morris Ferry, on Darby Creek, Lazaretto Road."

Meanwhile, the John Morton Monument Association had been striving, with varying degrees of success, to enlist public interest and support for an endeavor to "erect and forever maintain a suitable and enduring monument to perpetuate the memory of John Morton." The Pennsylvania General Assembly offered an appropriation to be matched by the county, but in spite of this, progress was discouragingly slow.

In 1930, however, an intensive drive for funds began, with almost every service club and other organization in Delaware County taking part, as well as a great many individuals, including teachers and pupils in the schools. The years of depression halted progress, but with improving conditions a new idea gave fresh impetus to the drive: Why not develop the supposed John Morton birthplace as a memorial, instead of erecting a monument? This suggestion won enthusiastic support, and in 1935 the Assembly modified earlier legislation to conform to the changed objective. In 1937 the property was formally conveyed to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The Bureau of Parks of the Pennsylvania Department of Forests and Waters, aided by the Works Progress Administration and by many individuals and groups, then proceeded with restoration of the house and improvement of the grounds.

On Saturday, October 8, 1938, dedication ceremonies took place, and an official marker of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania proclaimed the house to be the birthplace of John Morton.

THE CLAIM IS DROPPED

So many had a part in bringing to fulfillment the long-held dream of a memorial to John Morton, that, not surprisingly, the ancient house became, in the years following its restoration, an object of unusual affection and interest.

removed and taken into the house for safekeeping), a few scattered bricks, and part of the chimney (propped up by scaffolding) remain. The letters "M M" are still to be seen, but their existence is a precarious one.

When these initials were set into the wall, Morton Morton could not have foreseen that in our own day they would cause the building of the house to be mistakenly attributed to Morton Mortonson, Sr., his great-grandfather, or that "The Morton Mortonson House," in Norwood Borough, would come to be esteemed as one of Delaware County's earliest landmarks. As a representative, however, of the considerable number of good masonry homes built in this part of Delaware County during the second half of the eighteenth century, it has real historic value. A full inventory of its contents, made at the time of Morton Morton's death in 1781, will be useful when a restoration of the house is undertaken.

Appendix II

JOHN MORTON'S WILL

Original filed in office of the Register of Wills, Chester County Courthouse, West Chester; copy in Will Book F, Vol. 6 (1774-79), p. 280.

WITH AN AWFUL REVERENCE to the Great Almighty God Creator of all Mankind, I JOHN MORTON of Ridley in the County of Chester, in the Province of Pennsylvania, being sick and weak in Body, but of sound mind & memory, thanks be given to almighty God for the same, and for all other his mercies and Favours, and Considering the Certainty of death & the uncertainty of the time thereof, do for the settling such Temporal Estate as it hath pleased God to bless me with in this life make this my last Will and Testament as Followeth.

Imp^{rs}: My Will and mind is that all my Just debts & Funeral Expences be fulli paid and satisfied by my Executors hereafter named, as soon as Conveniently may be after my decease.

Item, I Give and Bequeath unto my dearly beloved Wife Ann the sum of Three Hundred Pounds, one third of which to be paid in Gold, and my two Negroes George and Dinah together with my best Bed & Furniture a case of drawers six Chairs, one Horse or Mare, two Cows Six Sheep all of her Choice, my Looking Glass in the Front Room upstairs all my China ware and Tea equipage, all my silver spoons, my best Tea Table and my Cloaths Press, and I do give, devise and bequeath unto my said wife, the one Moiety or half part of the Messuage or Tenement and Tract of Land where I now dwell, which was devised to me by my deceased Father, and of the Piece of Land my late Father Purchased of Andrew Torton, Containing in the whole one Hundred & twenty Acres, and also the Moiety of that part of the Meadow Ground hereinafter devised to my son Aaron, To Hold to her and her Assigns for & during the term of her natural life, and from and immediately after her decease, I Give, devise and bequeath the said Moiety of the said Messuage, Lands & Premises to my son Aaron his Heirs & Assigns Forever; and my will is that the Legacies aforesaid to my said wife, shall be in Lieu and barr of Dower. & I Give her my Riding Chair.

Item, I Give, devise and Bequeath unto my said son Aaron his Heirs and Assigns Forever, the other Moiety or half part of the aforesaid

Messuage or Tenement & tract of one Hundred & twenty Acres of Land, (Excepting Fifteen Acres of Woodland hereinafter devised to my son John.)

Item, I Give, devise and Bequeath unto my son Sketchley, and to his Heirs & Assigns Forever, all that Brick Messuage or Tenement & Tracts or Pieces of Land, Containing about Sixty Acres which I Purchased of John Hendrickson, and also the Piece of Forty one Acres of Land which I purchased of Jonas Morton, (Except one Acre thereof hereafter devised to my son John) and also all my right to any unlocated Lands in this Province, with one half my Books, all my surveying Instruments & my Negroe boy Jeffery.

Item, I Give, devise and bequeath unto my son John, and to his Heirs & Assigns, Forever, the Messuage or Tenement & Sixty Acres of Land which I Purchased of Matthias Hendrickson & also Fifteen Acres of Woodland to be taken off the Northeasterly side of this Tract I live on adjoining the said Sixty Acres, & to extend upon the North Line as far as Lewis Trimble's corner tree, and also one Acre part of the Forty one Acres Purchased of Jonas Morton, to extend from the main body of that piece to Lewis's Road, and also the other half of my Books, and the sum of Ten Pounds, & my Watch.

Item, I Give, devise & Bequeath unto my three sons Sketchley, John & Aaron all my Marsh or Meadow Ground, Containing About Thirty Acres, to be Equally divided between them by Lines from the Shore to the River, To Hold to them their Heirs and Assigns Forever, as Tenants in Common.

Item, I Give and Bequeath unto my daughter Mary my Negroe boy Joe, with what she has already had.

Item, I Give & Bequeath to my daughter Sarah my Negroe boy Tom, and the Sum of Two Hundred and Fifty Pounds.

Item, I Give and Bequeath to my daughter Lydia, the sum of Two Hundred and Seventy Pounds.

Item, I Give and Bequeath to my daughter Ann the sum of Two Hundred and Seventy Pounds.

Item, I Give & Bequeath to my daughter Elizabeth the sum of Two Hundred and Seventy Pounds.

Item, My Will is that Fifty Pounds as an Apprentice Fee for John be paid to his Master out of my Personal Estate.

Item, My Will is that the one hundred Pounds payable out of the Land I bought of John Hendrickson at the decease of the widow of Israel Hendrickson, be paid out of my personal Estate to my son Sketchley.

Item, My Will & mind is that all the Gold I have in Possession (after my Wife's one Hundred Pounds is deducted) together with such Paper money Emited by Acts of Assembly of this Province as I have by me, shall be (in part of their Legacies) divided between my said wife & four daughters in Proportion to the legacies severally hereby bequeathed them.

Item, And all the rest, residue and remainder of my Estate, whether real, personal or mixed, of what kind, nature, degree or Quality soever, I Give, devise & bequeath to my wife and Five daughters as follows viz. one ninth to my wife, one ninth to my daughter Mary, one ninth to my daughter Sarah; Two ninths to my daughter Lydia, two ninths to my daughter Ann & two ninths to my daughter Elizabeth.

Item, I Will that the Beaufet in my front room do go with the Freehold and remain annexed thereto.

Item, My will is that the Watercourse by me made be supported, upheld & maintained by all my sons in proportion to the Quantity of Meadow belonging to each, which is thereby water'd.

Item, My will is and I do strictly enjoin my children that immediately on receiving their legacies they do release to my son John all right to their Grandmother Mary Sketchley's real Estate, excepting Four Acres at the Northwesterly corner of this place at the head of Daniel Morton's land which Four Acres I will they shall release to my son Aaron.

Item, My will is that if either of my sons John or Aaron shall happen to die in their minority & without Issue, then the real Estates hereby devised to such deceased, shall descend to my son Sketchley & my surviving son as Tenants in Common, they paying the sum of Eighty Pounds to be equally divided among all my daughters, and if both my said sons shall so die then their real Estates shall descend to my said son Sketchley in Fee, he paying thereout to each of my daughters the sum of Fifty Pounds.

Item, If any of my daughters shall die in their Minority, Intestate, Unmarried & without Issue, then & in such case my will is, that the legacy & share of her so dying shall be equally divided between my wife & surviving daughters.

Item, My will & mind is that my Executors may put & place out my younger Children's money at Interest untill Guardians are Legally appointed for them, but not untill they have first Consulted & obtained the Approbation of my Friend Henry Hale Graham respecting the safety thereof.

Lastly, I Nominate, Constitute & appoint my loving Wife Ann & my son Sketchley to be Executors of this my last Will and Testament, hereby revoking all former Wills by me made, and declaring this and no other to be my last Will & Testament In Witness whereof, I the said John Morton have hereunto set my Hand & seal this Twenty Eighth day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand Seven Hundred Seventy and seven.

Signed, Sealed, Published, Pronounced & declared by the said John Morton as and for his last Will & Testament In the Presence of us the Subscribers.	}	JOHN MORTON
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JAMES WOOD

Affirm^d

THOMAS SMITH

Sworn

H. H. GRAHAM

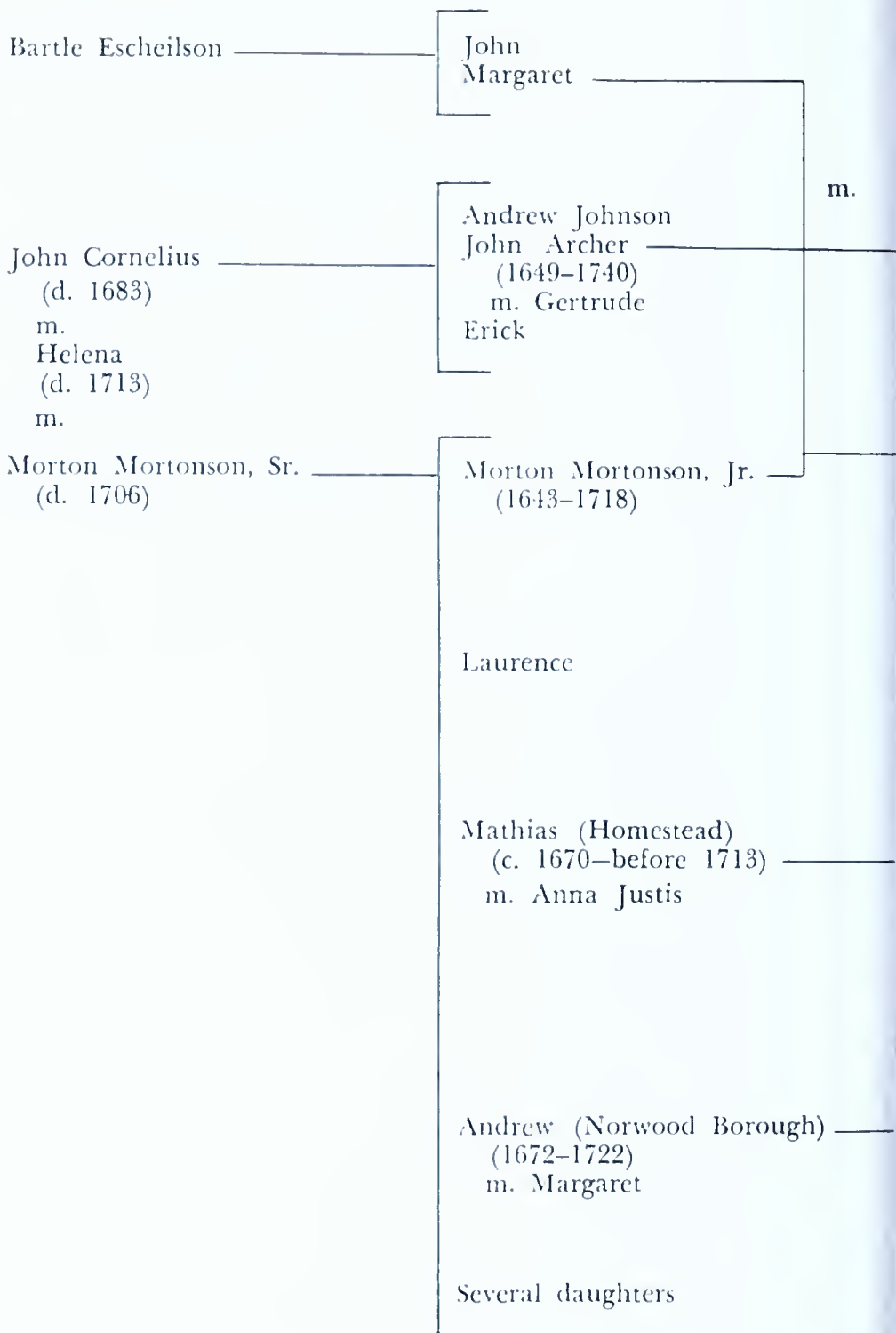
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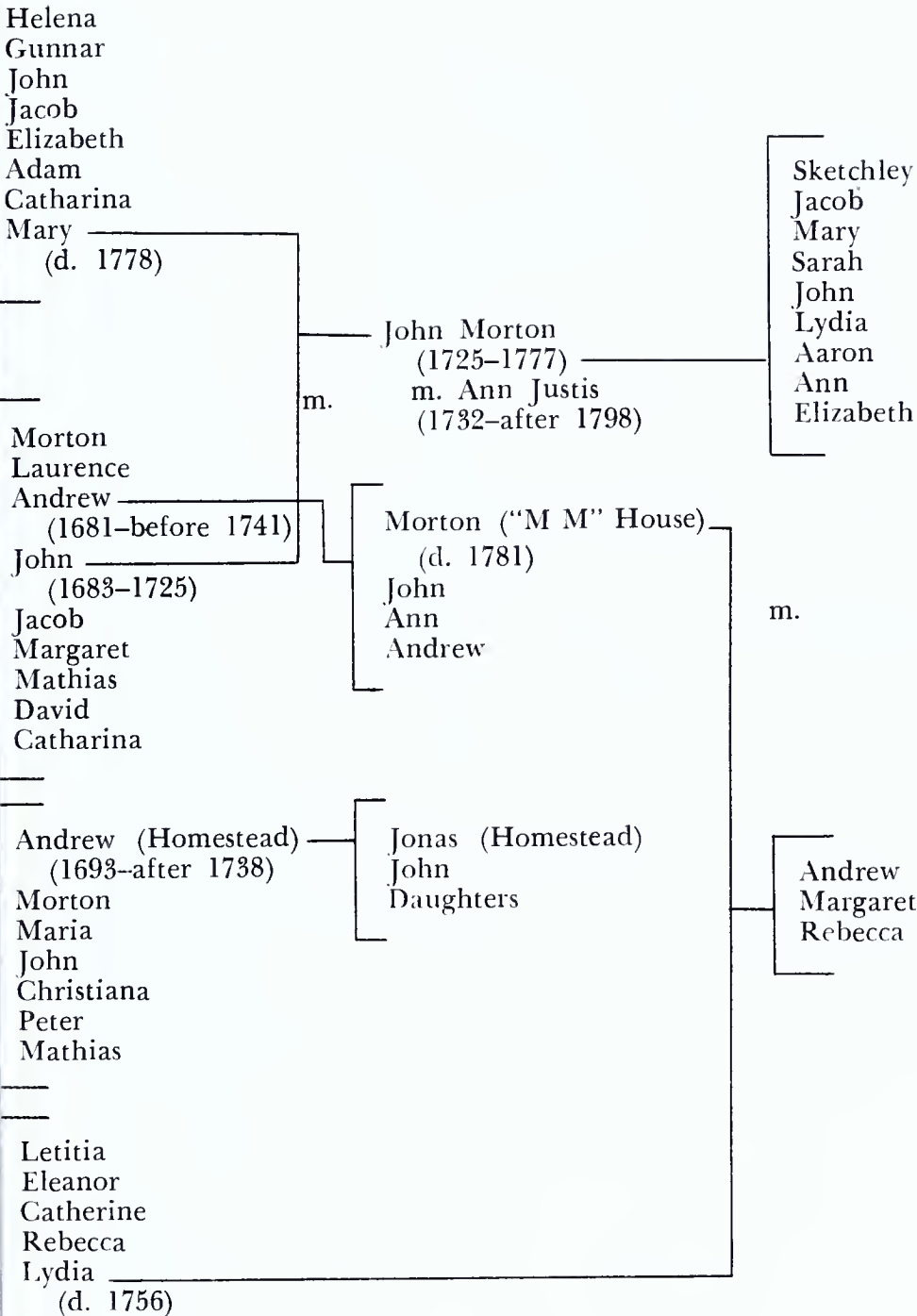
John Morton

Will

Prov^d August 26th 1778

Appendix III
GENEALOGICAL TABLE





This genealogical table is incomplete, its purpose being to assist the reader is visualizing the relationships among the Morton family members referred to in the text.



